Thesis

Talk of God and Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy: Issues and Developments

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Anglo-American analytic philosophy in the twentieth century has had a deep interest in problems associated with language.[1] Critics of analytic philosophy frequently dismiss this preoccupation with linguistic analysis as philosophy's abandonment of its responsibility to probe the perennial profound questions about our universe and human existence. But this criticism reflects misunderstanding of the reasons for philosophy's fascination with language. For, at its best, analytic philosophy is interested in language not for its own sake but because of the conviction that careful analysis of certain central issues in the philosophy of language sheds significant insight upon recurring problems in other areas, such as the philosophy of mind, epistemology, ethics, and even ontology.

The emphasis upon linguistic analysis has had both a negative and positive impact upon Christian theology. The negative impact, due to the wholesale assault by the Logical Positivists upon metaphysics (including theology) as cognitively meaningless[2] is well known. What is not so widely appreciated, however, is that recent work in the philosophy of language has provided tools for clarifying some central issues in Christian theology as well.

For example, throughout the centuries, a central problem in Christian theism has been the status of what are often called "divine predicates", that is, terms such as 'loving', 'good', 'wise', 'strong', etc. which are applied to God. God is said to be an infinite, transcendent, limitlessly perfect Being whereas we are finite and imperfect creatures. Meanings of terms such as 'wise' and 'loving' are

intimately related to the finite context in which they originate and are generally used. How, then, can they be used meaningfully of an infinite and transcendent God? Philosopher Frederick Ferré expresses the problem this way:

> Either human language is allowed to retain its meaning, drawn from human experience of the finite, in which case it cannot be about the God of theism, who is not supposed to be finite or to be properly describable in finite terms; or language, 'purified' of its anthropocentric roots, is emptied of meaning for human beings, in which case it can be neither human language nor —for us— about God... If univocal, then language falls into anthropomorphism and cannot be about *God*; if equivocal, then language bereft of its meaning leads to agnosticism and cannot for us be *about* God.[3]

The options here seem to be mutually exclusive: Either terms have the same meanings when predicated of God that they have when predicated of creatures or they do not. If they retain the same meanings then it cannot really be God that we are talking about, since we are engaging in anthropomorphism. But if they acquire entirely different meanings then how can the statements in which they function be informative for us?

In this paper I will focus upon this question in an effort to illustrate how analytic philosophy in this century impacts a central issue in theology. Some philosophers answer the question by asserting that *no* predicate terms can be meaningfully applied to God. The most notorious example here is the influential movement known as Logical Positivism, which will be briefly examined. But most theologians and philosophers have answered the question in terms of the analogical predication of God and creatures, an answer given classic expression by St. Thomas Aquinas. The central insights of Aquinas will be noted, after which attention will be given to some recent analytic philosophers who have helped to clarify the model of analogy.

I. Logical Positivism

During the 1950s and 1960s philosophical and theological journals in the West were saturated with seemingly endless discussions of the "meaningfulness" of religious discourse.[4] The agenda for discussion was set largely by Logical Positivism, an extremely powerful movement in its day. Logical Positivists[5] embarked upon an ambitious course intended to "set philosophy upon the sure path of science" and, as a result of this, to eliminate all metaphysics —including theology— from serious philosophical inquiry. Positivism launched a vigorous attack upon theology as being "cognitively meaningless". The question was not *how* terms ordinarily used in discourse about finite creatures could be applied meaningfully to God; rather it was *whether* one could make *any* informative statement about God at all. At the apex of the assault A. J. Ayer brashly asserted "To say 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false."[6] Theologians scrambled about madly trying to appease their critics and salvage their calling.

Although the claim that we cannot speak informatively about a transcendent God is implicit in the thought of the 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume, it was not until the early decades of the 20th century that this was made explicit and vigorously defended by a major philosophical movement. Whereas Hume and Immanuel Kant had attacked metaphysics on the ground that (supposedly) *we are not able to know metaphysical truths*, Logical Positivists went a step further and claimed that *there are no metaphysical truths to be known.* The language of metaphysics, including theology, is cognitively meaningless. Talk about God may serve other valuable functions (e.g. it may be comforting or inspire one to act in certain desirable ways) but it is not informative since it does not constitute meaningful statements about God which are either true or false.

How could metaphysics be so easily eliminated from the realm of informative discourse? In retrospect it is difficult to appreciate the intense seriousness with which Positivists' claims were taken. But we must remember that the philosophical climate of the early 20th century was shaped by tremendous

advances in the philosophy of science, mathematics, and logical theory, and thus scientific method, rooted in empirical observation, provided the paradigm for knowledge. The motivation behind Positivism was not so much overt hostility to theology as it was a desire to provide a comprehensive model for genuine knowledge which was grounded in what was taken to be paradigmatic —the hard physical sciences.

Positivists asserted that they had found a criterion by which they were able to distinguish between all cognitively meaningful statements and those utterances which, although they may intially appear to be meaningful, are in fact cognitively meaningless. This criterion was given various names, but is generally known as the *Verifiability Principle*.[7] The positivists' argument against the meaningfulness of talk of God can be expressed in the following syllogism:

(1) A neccessary condition for any statement S being a factually informative, or cognitively meaningful, statement is that S be in principle verifiable or falsifiable.

(2) Because of the implications of the doctrine of God's transcendence, fundamental statements about God are neither verifiable nor falsifiable.

(3) Therefore, fundamental statements about God are not factually informative.

The Positivists were attempting to formulate an adequate general criterion of factual meaning. Presupposed by this was the notion that all informative non-analytic statements must be, at least in principle, empirically testable or capable of being shown to be true or false (or at least probable or improbable) by reference to specifiable empirical data under specifiable conditions. The criterion was obviously derived from the methodology of the physical sciences.

Since the argument form of the above syllogism is valid, if both premises are true then the conclusion also must be true. Initially, philosophers and theologians by and large accepted the truth of the first premise, and thus those who wished to deny the conclusion were forced to argue that premise (2) was

somehow inadequate. Some readily conceded that religious discourse is not cognitively meaningful, that is, that it does not constitute factually informative statements which are true or false. Rather, they argued, religious utterances serve other "non-cognitive" functions, such as expressing intentions to carry out certain behavior policies (Braithwaite), or are reflections of "bliks" or ultimate ways of interpreting the universe (Hare), or function as part of a unique "language game" with its own internal criteria of adequacy (Phillips).[8]

Others contended (rightly) that non-cognitivists seriously misinterpreted the nature of religious discourse. For when Christians speak of God they intend to be making actual statements about God which are true. Thus various ingenious arguments were put forward to show that talk about God was in fact verifiable or falsifiable (at least in principle) and thus passed the Positivists' litmus test for cognitive meaning. Undoubtedly the most famous and influential such attempt was John Hick's proposal of "eschatological verification"[9]. Hick argued that the possibility of experiential confirmation of key theistic statements is built into the Christian understanding of God. Thus, the statement "God exists" is indeed cognitively meaningful since there are conceivable states of affairs (perhaps not in this life but in the life to come) which would remove all grounds for rationally doubting the truth of the statement. Hick suggests that survival of physical death and the experiences of the fulfillment of God's purposes for us (as these are disclosed in the Christian Scriptures), and of communion with God as revealed in Christ would constitute in principle verification of the statement "God exists". If Hick's argument is successful, then clearly premise (2) of the Positivists' argument must be rejected and the challenge of verifiability has been met on its own terms. Even on the Positivists' own criterion for cognitive meaning, then, talk about God cannot be ruled out as meaningless. However Hick's proposal stimulated a vigorous discussion in philosophical journals, and it is by no means clear that his notion of eschatological verification will meet the Positivists' test for cognitive meaning.[10]

But increasingly it became clear that the Verifiability Principle itself was highly problematic, and thus that there was good reason for rejecting the first

premise of the Positivists' argument. The difficulty was in articulating an adequate formulation of the Principle. This proved to be notoriously difficult. In the early days of the Vienna Circle (a group of philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians which met together in the 1920s and 1930s) it was held that the cognitive meaning of a non-analytic statement is determined by the experiences that would conclusively verify it. But this proved inadequate since, among other problems, it ruled out as meaningless all statements of universal scope (e.g. "All crows are black"), as they cannot, even in principle, be conclusively verified by experience. Regardless of how many crows have been observed to be black it is always logically possible that tomorrow a crow will be discovered which is not black.[11] This, of course, would have disastrous consequences for science — something the Positivists could not allow.

Taking their cue from Sir Karl Popper's discussion of falsifiability in science, some Positivists then suggested that conclusive *falsifiability*, instead of *verifiability*, should be the criterion of factually meaningful statements.[12] But this too proved unsatisfactory. For although conclusive falsifiability does allow for the informative nature of universal statements ("All crows are black" can in principle be falsified by finding one crow that is not black) it does not allow for the meaningfulness of many existential statements. For example, "There is at least one unicorn" must be judged meaningless (and not simply false) because regardless of how much one searches and fails to find a unicorn it is always possible that one will be discovered tomorrow. Furthermore, the falsification criterion was plagued by a disturbing asymmetry between the meaningfulness of a statement and its contradictory. "All crows are black" is meaningful because falsifiable, whereas its contradictory, "There is at least one crow that is not black" must be judged unfalsifiable and thus meaningless.

These, and similar, difficulties led to the abandonment of the notion of "strong" or conclusive verifiability or falsifiability. What followed were many attempts to arrive at an adequate weaker criterion of "testability" or "confirmation", the most famous of which was A. J. Ayer's immensely influential work *Language, Truth, and Logic.*[13]

We cannot here pursue discussion of the many attempts to arrive at an adequate formulation of the Principle. Suffice it to say that no one was able to formulate a version of the Principle which would allow for the meaningfulness of obviously meaningful statements (including many statements of science) and yet which would rule out as meaningless many obviously non-sensical statements. Many philosophers pointed out that the statement of the Verifiability Principle itself was in question since it could not, even in principle, be confirmed or disconfirmed by any experience. On its own terms, then, should we not reject the statement of the Principle as cognitively meaningless? By the mid-1960s it was clear that the Positivists' criterion for cognitive meaning was in serious trouble. Alvin Plantinga spoke for many when he stated "... the fact is that no one has succeeded in stating a version of the verifiability principle that is even remotely plausible; and by now the project is beginning to look unhopeful."[14] And speaking of the challenge to theism posed by the Verifiability Principle, George Mavrodes observed "the challenge itself is so muddled that theologians, as well as religious laymen, might reasonably be excused from responding to it until philosophers have formulated it in some more coherent terms."[15] Although there have been some attempts in recent years to reconstruct a satisfactory version of verifiability,[16] Logical Positivism as a philosophical movement today is dead and most philosophers would agree that the attempt to formulate an adequate general criterion of cognitive meaning is misguided.

Much philosophical water has passed under the bridge during the past forty years. The great irony in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy is that whereas Logical Positivism as a movement has been thoroughly discredited, the philosophy of religion (and Christian philosophical theology in particular) is one of the most flourishing and respectable branches of contemporary philosophy.

II. Analogical Predication

It is sometimes assumed that twentieth century analytic philosophy has been primarily shaped by the methodology and agenda of Logical Positivism, and thus that philosophy's sole concern with religious discourse has been to show that the latter is cognitively meaningless. But this is simply not the case. Analytic philosophy in this century has had an abiding interest in a cluster of problems associated with language, and developments in recent years, far from promoting the Positivists' agenda, have proven to be immensely helpful in clarifying certain problems central to Christian theistic discourse. One such problem is the status and meaning of terms used in talk of God.

This is not a new problem. Questions about the adequacy of human language to capture the divine reality were carefully addressed by some of the early Church Fathers, with many early theologians opting for a version of the *via negativa*, or way of negation.[17] The *via negativa* maintains that terms denoting positive attributes cannot be applied to God, although negative terms which signify what God is not may be predicated of God. That is, although we cannot speak meaningfully of *what God is*, we can speak informatively about *what He is not*. The *via negativa* has always exerted considerable influence in Christian theology and serves as a corrective to those who tend to obscure the notion of God's transcendence. However, as St Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) was later to show, the *via negativa* can only function satisfactorily if we first have some positive identifiable knowledge about God.[18]

St Thomas Aquinas and Analogy

Aquinas moved the discussion of divine predication forward considerably with his theory of analogical predication of God and creatures. In the statement by Ferré quoted at the beginning of this paper there seem to be only two options: Either words such as 'wise' have precisely the same meanings when used of God and of creatures (they are used *univocally*) or they have entirely different

meanings (they are used *equivocally*). But Aquinas pointed out that there is a third option. Words can be used *analogically* of God and creatures. That is, words used in divine predication have meanings similar to, but still distinct from, the meanings they have when used of ordinary creatures. Aquinas developed his theory of analogical predication[19] with considerable subtlety and sensitivity to language, and it is a tribute to his genius that many of his insights have been confirmed by recent work in the philosophy of language. However, his discussions are also marred by some erroneous views about the nature of language and some questionable metaphysical assumptions.

We might summarize in a very general way Aquinas' theory of analogical predication as follows. Since God is a categorially unique, transcendent, infinite Being words used in divine predication cannot be used in precisely the same senses in which they are used of creatures. But neither can they be used in entirely different senses or they will be uninformative. They must thus be used in a sense similar to, but still distinct from, the senses in which they are used of creatures. They must be used analogously of God and creatures.

Aquinas held that informative analogous predication presupposes that there is an actual ontological similarity between God and creatures. He further held that this element of ontological similarity can be established by demonstrating that there is an intrinsic relation of efficient causality between God and creatures (viz. God is the cause of the analogous perfection —e.g. wisdom— found in the creature) and by appealing to the scholastic principle of likeness between cause and effect (*omne agens agit simile sibi*). This principle, widely accepted by scholastics, maintains that there is no cause (properly defined) whose effect does not bear some similarity to the cause. Thus the term 'wise', when used of God, has a meaning similar to but somehow distinct from its meaning when used of ordinary creatures. The similarity in meanings is based upon the ontological similarity (in some respects) which obtains between God and creatures.

However, in spite of the significant insights it advances, Aquinas' theory has been subjected to some strong criticism. He accepts some questionable assumptions about the nature of language and meaning, such as the ideational

theory of meaning. Furthermore, his contention that terms used analogously of God and creatures refer to irreducibly analogous concepts (viz. no concepts can be applied univocally to God and creatures) has met much criticism from non-Catholic philosophers. Critics point out that on Aquinas' theory it is difficult to escape theological agnosticism.[20]

But undoubtedly the major reason for dissatisfaction today with Aquinas' views on divine predication is not due to any semantic deficiency in the theory itself but rather to the questionable metaphysical assumptions it embraces. Aquinas looked to a comprehensive theory of analogy to provide answers to two distinct questions:

(1) How do we know that God has the particular attributes we ascribe to Him?

(2) How can we meaningfully use terms which are ordinarily used of attributes found in creatures to refer also to attributes found in God?

Analogy was thus developed as both an ontological and a linguistic relation. The answer to (1) was provided by natural theology and the *analogia entis* (analogy of being): Aquinas tried to establish an ontological relation of analogy between God and creatures by arguing that since God is the cause of creatures He must possess all the perfections that they possess, and that since God is the self-subsistent Being He must have every conceivable perfection. Having answered (1), Aquinas was then in position to answer (2) on the basis of the ontological relation of analogy between God and creatures and the purely linguistic phenomenon of analogical predication. But it is the metaphysical assumptions operative in his discussion of (1) that provoke the greatest criticism of Aquinas' theory of analogy by recent philosophers.[21] Few philosophers outside of Thomistic circles find his answer to (1) convincing, and since questions (1) and (2) are intimately linked in Aquinas' discussion his views on divine predication are often treated with skepticism as well.

It is crucial, however, to see that questions (1) and (2) above are logically

distinct. It is possible to reject Aquinas' answer to (1) and still retain his central insights regarding (2). In a seminal article in 1976 philosopher Patrick Sherry recognized this and called for a fresh look at Aquinas' theory of analogy:

> It is the ontological and epistemological foundations of [Aquinas'] teaching on analogy which arouses the greatest disquiet among many theologians and philosophers, rather than its linguistic aspect... Most philosophers are more opposed to the Natural Theology which undergirds Aquinas' teaching on analogy than to his views about predication as such... It does raise the question whether we can accept the philosophical or theological objections to Thomistic metaphysics and yet salvage much of Aquinas' teaching on analogy. It is conceivable that analogy as a linguistic theory can stand on its own feet, or that alternative religious or metaphysical supports are possible.[22]

Certainly questions (1) and (2) above are related. A satisfactory answer to (2) presupposes that we can (at least in principle) know that God has certain attributes and not others. But there are various ways of answering (1) apart from the route of natural theology advocated by Aquinas. Indeed, question (1) constitutes one of the central issues in the philosophy of religion. But it is entirely legitimate for one to claim to be able to answer (1) on the basis of divine revelation, the Christian Scriptures, and then on that basis to proceed to answer (2) accordingly.

Ludwig Wittgenstein on Family Resemblance and Language Games

The major insights from Aquinas are (a) the recognition that words used in divine predication must have meanings which are significantly similar to, yet distinct from, meanings the same words have when used in non-theological discourse, and (b) the further observation that the phenomenon of analogy in ordinary discourse provides a key to understanding terms used in religious discourse. Significantly, these fundamental insights have been amply corroborated by recent work in linguistics and the philosophy of language.

Perhaps no one has influenced recent philosophy of language as much as the late Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (d. 1951). Two of his contributions in particular have great relevance for the problem of religious discourse. First, although he did not actually use the term 'analogy' he called attention to the phenomenon of analogy in ordinary discourse. He carefully pointed out that the same words, when used in contrasting linguistic environments, can have related but distinct meanings.

> There are words with several clearly defined meanings. It is easy to tabulate these meanings. And there are words of which one might say: They are used in a thousand different ways which gradually merge into one another. No wonder that we can't tabulate strict rules for their use.[23]

And in a classic passage, Wittgenstein analyzes the many uses and meanings of the word 'game' and notes that although there is something that is common to all games, the different meanings of 'game' (e.g. board games, card games, ball games, social games) are significantly related and share in a kind of "family resemblance".[24] The various meanings share in "... a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing".[25] What Wittgenstein had in mind with his notion of "family resemblance" seems to have been the same phenomenon Aquinas referred to by the term 'analogy'.

Second, Wittgenstein made a major contribution by emphasizing the importance of understanding the "form of life" or "language game" in which discourse occurs for grasping the meaning of a particular term.[26] 'Strike' will mean one thing in the language game of a labor dispute or contract negotiation but will mean something quite different in the language game of baseball. And one can only understand the meaning of a word in a given language game if he is acquainted with the form of life (viz. the relevant practices, beliefs, activities, goals, etc.) which accompany the language game. Wittgenstein's point is this: One must become (somewhat) acquainted with the relevant discourse environment if one is to understand the meanings of key terms in the discourse in question.

James Ross on Meaning Extension and Analogy

Unfortunately, Wittgenstein never worked out in a rigorous manner what was meant by "family resemblance" and "language game". The latter notion is particularly vague.[27] However in an important and rigorous recent work philosopher James Ross has impressively developed Wittgenstein's basic insight and has drawn a distinction between what he calls "craft-bound" and "unbound" discourse.[28] Craft-bound discourse is a kind of discourse in which relevant "skill in action" is necessary for the full grasp of the discourse. Technical philosophical discourse, legal, medical, political, auto-mechanical discourses are all examples of craft-bound discourse. At least some mastery of the relevant craft is necessary for comprehension of the key terms used in craft-bound discourse. Unbound discourse, by contrast, is readily accessible and does not require mastery of any special craft.

Ross identifies several distinctive features of craft-bound discourse. 1.) Part of its vocabulary has affinities and oppositions of meaning which are detectably different from those of the same words in unbound discourse. 2.) Although one may already know how to speak the relevant natural language (e.g. English), one has to learn how to use craft-bound discourse. 3.) Usually, a craft-bound discourse has, in addition to words that occur in other craft-bound discourse, a vocabulary of its own that is internally interdefined and is equivocal with the same words used in contexts outside the craft. (It may be that some words do not occur outside the craft at all.) 4.) The discourse serves to motivate and regulate human behavior in pursuit of the relevant objectives of the craft. 5.) There are conditions for the acceptability of utterances for communication in pursuit of craft objectives which are more stringent than those for unbound discourse. That is, there are often restrictions upon paraphrase, implication, or qualification which do not apply to the same words in unbound discourse.

Given the description above, it is clear that the discourse of Christian theism is an example of craft-bound discourse. One will not really understand the meanings of key predicate terms used in talk of God unless one has (to some

extent) become an "insider" to the activity and discourse environment of Christian theism. This does not mean that talk of God is somehow abnormal or esoteric, for in this respect Christian theism is no different from such ordinary activities as plumbing, gardening, baseball, or auto-mechanics — all of which employ craft-bound discourse. Nor does this mean that only Christians can understand Christian theistic discourse, or that there is no continuity between the meanings of terms used in theological discourse and the meanings of the same terms in unbound discourse, or that the "logic" of theistic discourse is somehow autonomous and internal to the Christian "language game". The point here is simply that the meanings of predicate terms used in talk of God are largely determined by the subject matter, activities, and objectives of Christian theism, and that unless one is familiar with these the meanings of such terms will be unclear. Much of the problem with the earlier Positivists' attack upon metaphysics, and Christian theism in particular, was due to a fundamental failure to recognize the great diversity in discourse environments and to pay sufficient attention to the distinctive environment in which talk of God occurs. Instead, Positivists imposed from outside an arbitrary criterion of cognitive meaning, and thus it is hardly suprising that they found that religious discourse failed to pass their litmus test.

Wittgensetin's insight concerning "family resemblance", noted above, has proven to be helpful in clarifying what Aquinas seems to have meant by analogical predication of God and creatures. Taking a cue from Wittgenstein, a number of recent philosophers have suggested that what Aquinas had in mind can be explained in terms of the linguistic phenomenon of ***meaning extension***. Language is flexible and is constantly undergoing change. Words with accepted and established uses and meanings are frequently given extended meanings in more specialized kinds of discourse (e.g. 'force' or 'mass' in physics; 'strike' in baseball; 'brief' in legal discourse, etc.). Bernard Harrison correctly observes that meaning extension is "too common and familiar for its existence to be denied".[29] An example of meaning extension is the word 'car'. Originally 'car' denoted a kind of cart, but over time its use was extended to new contexts so that

it came to refer to the automobile as well as the cage of an elevator.

Since meaning extension is an integral feature of living natural languages, perhaps key terms used in religious discourse should also be regarded as products of meaning extension. Several philosophers have recently suggested that words such as 'loving', 'wise', and 'good', when used in divine predication, are actually words taken from ordinary discourse and given extended meanings in the context of Christian theistic discourse. For example, in an influential article James Ross stated

> The meanings of terms in religious discourse are to a large extent derived. There does not seem to be serious disagreement over that view, adopted by Alston and common to most persons who have discussed the matter. At least minimally, it is believed that one learns how to use such predicates in religious discourse only after having learned some other kind of use for those predicates... The justification for using such terms of God is that they already have a very wide range of uses in non-religious contexts, and that we are merely continuing an on-going process of stretching.[30]

It does seem that many of the predicate terms used in talk of God are indeed ordinary terms which have been given extended uses and meanings, and that their meanings in the theological context are parasitic upon their meanings in other non-theological contexts. Surely the meaning of 'love' in "God is love" is significantly similar to, and actually dependent upon, the meaning of 'love' in "A father loves his children". However, it is important to see that meaning extension *by itself* is incapable of guaranteeing the informative nature of talk of God.

For one thing it seems clear that not all words used in talk of God are ordinary terms with extended meanings. Some words are indigenous to religious discourse and do not seem to have a pre-religious use (e.g. 'holy', 'sin', 'Holy Trinity', 'God'); and other terms seem to be used univocally (viz. with the same meaning in each case) of God and creatures, and thus cannot be regarded as products of meaning extension (e.g. 'one', 'being', predicate terms used in negative predication, syncategorematic terms such as 'not', 'every', 'if', etc.).

Furthermore, it is often assumed that meaning extension is a one-way street,

going from non-religious discourse to Christian theistic discourse. But might it not also be the case that meaning extension proceeds from theistic discourse to non-religious contexts? This seems to be the case with words such as 'sin' and 'God', which have been given extended meanings in non-religious contexts (e.g. "It is a sin for anyone to be so good at the piano!" or "Adam Smith is the god of free market capitalism"). But if so, then a model of meaning extension which appeals to the original pre-religious meanings of terms to justify use of the same terms in religious contexts cannot establish the meaningfulness of all terms used in talk of God.

But undoubtedly the greatest difficulty with the meaning extension model is that it provides an answer on the level of diachronic linguistics to a question raised on the synchronic level. *Diachronic linguistics* is concerned with the historical development of natural languages, or in the case of semantics, with the relationships between meanings of words over an extended period of time, whereas *synchronic linguistics* and semantics are concerned with linguistic and semantic relations at any given moment in time, such as the present.[31] The model of meaning extension sketched above explains the changes in word meaning over a period of time, and thus is an example of diachronic or etymological semantics. And it may well prove useful in understanding the etymology of certain religious terms. But simply appealing to a model of meaning extension is not sufficient to guarantee the informative nature of divine predication. Words change in meaning. Sometimes the extended meanings of words remain signifi cantly related to the original meanings (e.g. 'car' as originally referring to a cart and then later referring to an automobile), but sometimes they do not (e.g. 'nice' once meant "silly" but through a series of changes it came to mean, among other things, "precise"). Thus meaning extension can result in homonymy or equivocation.[32]

Therefore, even if it is granted that, etymologically, most predicate terms used in talk of God are the product of meaning extension, how do we know that such meaning extension has not resulted in homonymy? How do we know that 'wise' does not have entirely equivocal, or different, meanings in "God is wise"

and "He is a wise man"? What neeeds to be shown is that current uses of 'wise' result in significant *relatedness of meanings* in the two sentences. And meaning extension by itself cannot do this.

James Ross, quoted above, recognized the inadequacy of his earlier model of meaning extension and embarked upon an intensive study of the linguistic phenomenon of analogy. Ross' findings are published in *Portraying Analogy*, where he concludes that analogy, defined in terms of relatedness of meanings of words used in two or more distinct discourse environments, is far more pervasive and integral to natural languages than even Aquinas had imagined. He convincingly demonstrates that ordinary discourse makes extensive use of analogy, indeed that analogy is indispensable to ordinary discourse. Analogical predication in Christian discourse, then, is not an abnormal or deviant kind of predication. And if it is an essential feature of ordinary discourse it is superfluous to demand justification for it in general. It follows then that *prima facie* use of analogical predication in Christian theistic discourse need not be regarded as suspect.

The significance of Ross' study is not simply that he demonstrates that analogical predication is integral to ordinary discourse, but that he provides a clear model for identifying instances of analogical predication which can be applied on the synchronic level. Ross is concerned strictly with the linguistic phenomenon of analogy, and not with any ontological issues which might accompany analogical predication of God and creatures, and his model provides a workable mechanism for identifying cases of analogical predication simply by analyzing the linguistic and syntactical relations among words. Ross' discussion is highly technical and details of his model need not concern us here. Perhaps it will suffice to note that his model is based upon careful analysis of the syntactical relations among words in various discourse environments (what is called a "predicate scheme"), including their relations with near-synonyms, antonyms, contraries, and their capacity for similar paraphrase in other words. Application of his model to religious discourse reveals that terms such as 'wise', 'good', 'loving', 'strong', etc. are indeed used analogously of God and creatures; that is,

there is significant relatedness of meanings in the uses of the terms in the two contexts. If we are justified on other grounds (e.g. due to divine revelation) in believing that God is wise, for example, then on Ross' model we can demonstrate that 'wise' in "God is wise" has a meaning similar to, but still distinct from, the meaning of 'wise' in "Socrates is wise". The meanings of 'wise' in the two cases are related but not entirely the same. And this is precisely what Aquinas had pointed out in his own way seven centuries earlier.

William Alston and Literal Talk of God

It is almost axiomatic in much contemporary theology that one cannot speak literally of God, that is, that one cannot use predicate terms literally in talk of God. Thinkers as diverse as R. Bultmann, P. Tillich, K. Barth, I. M. Crombie, and I.T. Ramsey, all seem to hold that religious discourse is inherently highly symbolic, which usually seems to mean that it is metaphorical and not literal. Tillich, for example, declared that the only non-symbolic assertion we can make about God is "the statement that everything we say about God is symbolic".[33] God is said to be so "wholly other", so transcendent that terms cannot be literally applied to Him without resulting in absurdity. Now no informed believer would deny that many statements about God include highly metaphorical use of terms. The following statements include rich metaphors:

The Lord is my shepherd.

His hands prepared the dry lands.

The Lord is my rock and my fortress.

But the question here is whether *all* talk of God *must* be metaphorical, or whether it is possible to speak literally of God as well.

One thinker who has given this issue much thought in recent years is the distinguished Christian philosopher of language William Alston.[34] Alston's discussions are rigorous, technical, and informed by a thorough understanding not only of central issues in the philosophy of language but also of the context of Christian theism. Several points from his essays are worth mentioning here.

In the article "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology" Alston considers the question whether all talk of God must be metaphorical or whether it is possible to apply some terms literally to God. A metaphor is said to be irreducible if what it says cannot be said, even in part, in literal terms. In answering this question Alston draws several important distinctions, one of which is the Saussurian distinction between *language* and *speech*. A natural language is an abstract system, including morphemes and various syntactic relations, which is used for communication and thought. Speech, in the technical sense, is the use of that system (language) in communication. What is commonly referred to as the "problem of religious language" is then really a misnomer: the problem does not concern religious language itself (the syntactical and semantic relations of the terms) but rather concerns what one says when using religious language. The problem is thus a problem of religious discourse or speech.

How does this apply to the question of literal or metaphorical talk of God? Alston notes that often theologians speak in terms of the *literal meaning* or *metaphorical meaning* of a word (e.g. 'love'), and conclude that it cannot have a literal meaning when applied to God. But this, he claims, is a confusion. The terms 'literal' and 'metaphorical' do not stand for *meanings* of words but rather refer to contrasting *uses* of terms. A metaphor is an example of a figurative use of a word (or group of words) and stands in contrast to the literal use of the word.[35]

This distinction leads naturally to the definition of the word 'literal', which Alston defines as roughly "use in an established sense".

> A term can be said to be used literally when it is used in such a way that the meaning of the sentences in which it occurs is a determinate function of one of its senses... Whenever we use an expression with an assigned meaning we are using it literally.[36]

To use a word literally, then, is to use it in a manner that accords with its established, accepted use. When I make literal use of a predicate term in a subject/predicate statement, I utter the sentence with the claim that the property signified by the predicate term is possessed by the subject, or holds between the subjects, if the predicate is a relational one.

Alston notes that 'literal' has often been taken to mean something like "precise", "factual", "empirical", "ordinary", and "univocal". But this is highly misleading. He is worth quoting at length on this point.

> However common the conflation, it is simply a confusion to suppose that 'literal', in the historically distinctive sense just set out, implies any of the features just mentioned. Meanings that words have in a language can be more or less vague, open-textured, unspecific, and indeterminate in a variety of ways. Hence I can be using words literally and still be speaking vaguely, ambiguously, or unspecifically. Again, I can be using my words just as literally in asking questions, cursing fate, or expressing rage, as in soberly asserting that the cat is on the mat. The conflation of 'literal' with 'empirical', on the other hand, is something more than a vulgar error; it reflects a basic issue in the philosophy of language as to the conditions under which a word can acquire a meaning in the language. If this requires contact with "experience" in one or another of the ways spelled out in empiricist theories of meaning, then only terms with "empirical" meaning can be used literally, for only such terms have established senses. But that doesn't follow from just the meaning of the term 'literal'; it also requires an empiricist theory of meaning, and it is by no means clear that any such theory is acceptable.[37]

Now it is crucial to see that 'literal' is not synonymous with 'univocal'. For 'univovcal' is used to compare two or more uses of a single term, and applies when the same meaning is preserved in the several uses; 'literal', on the other hand, refers to a single use of a term, and applies when the term is used in an established sense. Thus the question whether a term such as 'wise' is used literally or metaphorically of God is quite different from the earlier question whether 'wise' is used analogously or univocally or equivocally of God and creatures. On Alston's definition it is perfectly possible for 'wise' to be used both literally and analogously simultaneously.

The question whether we are using terms literally in talk of God is really the question whether there are established and accepted senses of the terms in divine predication such that one can say what one wishes to communicate by

directly exploiting those senses. Clearly there are established and accepted uses and meanings of such key predicate terms as 'loving', 'wise', 'good', etc. in Christian theistic discourse. Accordingly, we may be said to be using 'wise', for example, literally in statements such as "God is wise". Of course, it does not follow from this that we are using 'wise' in precisely the same way in "God is wise" and "Socrates is wise". For, as we have seen, terms can be used literally and analogously simultaneously. Although we cannot reproduce it here, we should note that Alston provides an extended rigorous argument demonstrating that in subject/predicate sentences about God which include metaphorical use of the predicate term, the propositional content of the metaphorical statement can also be expressed literally. Alston, then, goes against much contemporary theology by rejecting the common assumption that metaphorical statements in talk of God make use of irreducible metaphors, or in other words, that the propositional content of the metaphors cannot be expressed, even in part, in literal terms.

It should be evident from even this brief discussion that analytic philosophy in this century has been much concerned with problems of Christian theistic discourse, and that in spite of the earlier hostile assault upon theology by Logical Positivism, more recent analytic philosophers have made some valuable contributions toward clarifying the status and meaning of predicate terms used in talk about God.

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1 For discussion of the relationship between philosophy and language in this century see *The Linguistic Turn*, ed. Richard Rorty, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., (New York: Penguin, 1966); and Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy*? (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

2 Philosophers generally distinguish between two classes of statements — analytic statements and statements which are not analytic. An analytic statement is a statement which is true or false solely because the words in the statement mean what they do.

"Bachelors are unmarried" is an example of an analytic statement. A non-analytic, or "synthetic", statement is a coherent statement whose negation is also a coherent statement. In other words, it is a statement which conveys "factual" information and which is either true or false, depending upon the actual state of affairs to which it refers. "Today is Tuesday" is non-analytic. 'Cognitively meaningful' is a technical philosophical term which is used to refer to non-analytic statements which are true or false. In this paper I will use the terms 'cognitively meaningful' and 'factually informative' interchangeably.

3 Frederick Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961) pp. 68–69.

4 For an overview of the issues see the collection of essays in *The Logic of God*, Malcolm Diamond & Thomas Litzenburg eds., (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975).

5 'Logical positivism' is a term coined in 1931 by A.E. Blumberg and H. Feigl to characterize the philosophical standpoint of an influential group of thinkers who comprised the Vienna Circle. The group included M. Schlick, R. Carnap, O. Neurath, H. Feigl, V. Kraft, and K. Godel, among others. It met regularly in the 1920s and by the 1930s its members had moved to posts in the U.S. and Europe, thereby exerting tremendous influence upon subsequent Anglo-American philosophy. See "Editor's Introduction" in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959); John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* pp. 367–393; Oswald Hanfling, *Logical Positivism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

6 A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 2nd ed., (New York: Dover, 1946) p. 120.

7 The Verifiability Principle was first explicitly stated by Friederich Waismann in "Logische Analyse des Wahrscheinlichkeitsbegriff" in *Erkenntnis*, 1, (1930), although it is also implicit in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung*, trans. by David Pears & B.F. McGuinness as *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), especially section 4.024. See R.W. Ashby's "The Verifiability Principle" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967) and C.G. Hempel, "The Empiricist Criterion of Meaning" in *Logical Positivism*, pp. 108–127.

8 See R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1955); R.M. Hare, "Theology and Falsification" in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, A. Flew & A. MacIntyre, eds., (London: SCM Press, 1955); D.Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (New York: Schoken, 1966). For a more recent non-cognitivist see Don Cuppit, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980) and idem, *The World to Come* (London: SCM, 1982).

9 See John Hick, "Theology and Verification" in *Theology Today*, XVII, (April 1960) pp. 12-31; idem, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967) chapter 8; and idem, "Eschatological Verification Reconsidered" in *Religious Studies*, 13, (June 1977) pp. 189–202.

10 See, for example, W. Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963) pp. 112-116; Kai Nielsen, "Eschatological Verification" in *The Canadian Journal of Theology*, 9, (October 1963); and M. Tooley, "John Hick and the Concept of Eschatological Verification" in *Religious Studies*, 12, (1976).

11 For discussion of the inadequacies of the Verifiability Principle see Hempel's "The Empiricist Criterion of Meaning" and Ashby's "The Verifiability Principle".

12 See Karl Popper's *Logik der Forschung* (1934), trans. by the author as *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1958) p. 40f. See also A. Flew, "Theology and Falsification" in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, pp. 1–8.

13 *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 1st ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936); 2nd ed., (London, Victor Gollancz: 1946).

14 Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967) p. 167.

15 George Mavrodes, "God and Verification" in *The Canadian Journal of Theology*, 10, (1964) p. 187f.

16 See, for example, Kenneth Klein, *Positivism and Christianity: A Study of Theism and Christianity* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974); Wesley Salmon, "Verifiability and Logic" in *Mind, Matter, and Method*, P. Feyerabend & G. Maxwell eds., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966) pp. 354–376; and M. Tooley, "Theological Statements and the Question of an Empiricist's Criterion of Cognitive Significance" in *The Logic of God*, pp. 481–524.

17 See the discussion by Eric Osborn, in *The Beginning of Christian Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) chapter 3; and H. A. Wolfson, "Negative

Attributes in the Church Fathers and the Gnostic Basilides" in *The Harvard Theological Review*, 50, (January 1957) pp. 145–156.

18 See Aquinas' *De Potentia Dei* VII.5 and *Summa Theologiae* I.q.13 a.2.

19 Major texts on analogical predication include Aquinas' *Scriptum in IV Libros Sententiarum P. Lombardi*, Lib. I dist. 19 q. 5 a. 2; *De Veritate*, q. 2 a. 11; *Questiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei* 7.5–7; *Summa Contra Gentiles* I. 32–34; and *Summa Theologiae* I. 13. For centuries the authoritative interpretation of Aquinas' theory was Cardinal Cajetan's *De Nominum Analogia* (1498), translated by E.A. Buchinski as *The Analogy of Names* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1953). However recent studies have been highly critical of Cajetan's interpretation. See, for example, Hampus Lyttkens, *The Analogy Between God and the World: An Investigation of its Background and Use by Thomas of Aquino* (Upsalla: Almquist & Wiksells, 1952); Ralph McInerny, *The Logic of Analogy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961); George Klubertanz, *St Thomas Aquinas on Analogy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1960); and Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963). Also helpful on Aquinas are Frederick Copleston's *Aquinas* (New York: Penguin, 1955) and Ettienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956).

20 Criticism of Aquinas on this point was forcefully made by the medieval scholastic John Duns Scotus (d. 1308). See Scotus' *Philosophical Writings*, trans. & ed. by A. Wolter (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962) pp. 22-29. Similar points have been made more recently by W. Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge*, pp. 66–67; and Paul Hayner, "Analogical Predication" in *The Journal of Philosophy*, LV, (Sept. 25, 1958) p. 859f. If the same term is used analogously of two entities it must be so used in virtue of some property(s) which the analogates share. Otherwise use of the same term would simply be coincidental and the meanings of the two terms would actually be equivocal (such as the meanings of 'record' in "music is recorded on this tape" and "he broke the indoor track record"). If the meanings of the term are not to be equivocal there must be some reason for using *that* term of the two analogates, and this reason will be something about the natures of the respective analogates. Thus if term T is used analogously of x and y then there must be something about x and y which warrants the analogous use of

T to describe them. And what warrants such analogous use will be some property(s) F which x and y share. Now if it is claimed that the concept of F is itself analogously applied to x and y (as Aquinas seems to hold) then we must simply look for some property(s) F' which x and y share which in turn justifies analogous application of the concept of F to x and y. Unless one is to engage in an infinite regress, in which use of analogous terms is justified on the basis of yet another analogous concept, there must be some property or set of properties which x and y share in a non-analogical manner.

21 See, for example, Humphrey Palmer's *Analogy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973); F. Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, chapter 6; John Morreall, *Analogy and Talking About God: A Critique of the Thomistic Approach* (Washington: University Press of America, 1979).

22 Patrick Sherry, "Analogy Today", *Philosophy*, 51, (1976) pp. 431–432.

23 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, Rush Rhees ed., (New York: Colophon, 1965) p. 28.

24 *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953) par. 66–67. Cf *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 17.

25 *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 67.

26 Ibid., pars. 7, 19, 23, 43, 65–66, 583, 654–655. "Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning." Idem, *Zettel*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) p. 73.

27 For discussion of this see Anthony Kenny's *Wittgenstein* (New York: Penguin, 1973) chapter 9.

28 James Ross, *Portraying Analogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

29 Bernard Harrison, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979) p. 70.

30 James Ross, "Analogy and the Resolution of Some Cognitivity Problems", *Journal of Philosophy*, LXVII, (Oct. 22, 1970) p. 739. For similar views see William Alston, "The Elucidation of Religious Statements" in *Process and Divinity*, W. L. Reese & E. Freeman eds., (La Salle: Open Court, 1964) pp. 429–444; Patrick Sherry, *Religion, Truth, and Language Games* (London: Macmillan, 1977) p. 57; and Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) chapters 2–3.

31 See F.R. Palmer, *Semantics*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 12.

32 Ibid., p. 101.

33 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, (London: Nisbett, 1957) p. 10; as quoted in John Macquarrie, *God-Talk* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967) p. 51.

34 Alston has written several very important articles on the subject. See especially "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology", in *Experience, Reason, and God*, ed. Eugene T. Long (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1980); "Can We Speak Literally of God?" in *Is God GOD* ?, A. D. Steuer & J. W. McClendon eds., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981); "Functionalism and Theological Language", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 22, (July 1985) pp. 221–230; and "Referring to God", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 24, (November 1988) pp. 113–128. The articles are reprinted in William Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).For Alston's views on language see also his earlier *The Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964).

35 The notion of metaphor bristles with controversy. Alston regards metaphor as a species of figurative uses of words, and holds that whenever an expression is used so that, even though it is used in none of its established uses, nevertheless, what is said is intelligible to a sensitive person with adequate grasp of the language, the expression is said to be used figuratively. Cf *Philosophy of Language*, p. 97; and *Divine Nature and Human Language*, pp. 21–30.

36 *The Philosophy of Language*, p. 102.

37 *Divine Nature and Human Language*, p. 25.

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